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Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations drill at Naval Hospital Bremerton

BY VJOHNSON – APRIL 14, 2014
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By Douglas H Stutz, Naval Hospital Bremerton Public Affairs

Naval Hospital Bremerton Victim Care Protocols were tested with a Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) and Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations (SAFE) drill on April 10.



Shivering and scared, assisted by a friend, with a black eye, swollen jaw, bruised neck, no shoes, torn and disheveled clothing, a patient is immediately admitted to Naval Hospital Bremerton's Emergency Department after she explained to the clerk she had been sexually assaulted as part of a Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations (SAFE) drill in conjunction with April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month (Photo by Douglas H Stutz, NHB Public Affairs).

It's a drill that everyone who responds to hopes that they never have to do. Candice, the alleged victim, shivering and scared, assisted by a friend, showed up with a black eye, swollen jaw, bruised neck, no shoes, torn and disheveled clothing at NHB's Emergency Department. In a shaken voice, she explained to the clerk she had been sexually assaulted.

"As soon as anyone comes in and says 'I've been assaulted,' that's all that is needed to start the SAFE process," said Lt. Cmdr. Lacy Gee, Main Operating Room Division Officer, SAFE examiner and official observer of the drill.

The Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations are part of the command's response ability in conjunction with the Navy's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Program to prevent and eliminate sexual assault.

For this drill, Candice shared that she was out for a mid-morning jog when 'out of nowhere' a guy came and dragged her off the road. She tried in vain to get away and was beaten before being assaulted.



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Candice was quickly triaged and with a victim advocate and SAFE examiner paged, was then seen by an ER nurse on duty. As an active duty servicemember, she was explained how the Navy restricted and unrestricted reporting policy encourages victims to seek the medical support that is available to them without fear of reprisal or stigma.



Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations (SAFE) staff members at Naval Hospital Bremerton use special camera gear as part of a SAFE drill held on Apr 10 to test the command's Victim Care Protocols. Lt. Sarah C. Huley, SAFE examiner is assisted by Hospitalman Britany Gil in providing medical support to alleged victim Candice who was admitted to NHB's Emergency Department after stating she had been assaulted. The training was part of NHB's recognition of April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month (Photo by Douglas H Stutz, NHB Public Affairs).

Lt. Stephany J. Daniell was the responding ER nurse who also happens to be on the SAFE examiner team. She explained who a victim advocate is and what they do, and what will take place once the SAFE examiner comes in. "Lt. Daniell was really very thorough in her role as the ER nurse. She was very impressive," commented Hospital Corpsman First Class Laura Blanco, Director of Surgical Services leading petty officer and victim advocate who played the role of the victim's friend.

When victim advocate Hospitalman Britany Gil arrived, she immediately established a relationship with Candice. "I'm going to take care of you," Gil said, further explaining what she does as a victim advocate is to completely help by listening, guiding and consoling a sexual assault victim through the entire uncomfortable process.

The SAFE examiner role was filled by Lt. Sarah Huley, who further explained the step-by-step process she would handle if this was a real case, from conducting a physical examination to obtaining digital imagery for official documentation.

Both the victim advocate and examiner also stressed the time element involved in such a scenario.

"A patient needs to know that this can be a lengthy process. It is not easy, especially from the emotional standpoint of the patient," said Gil.

"To any patient being seen at three o'clock in the morning, five minutes can seem like five hours," added Gee, who commended Gil and Huley for providing professional care and personal concern to their patient. NHB's SAPR and SAFE are comprehensive programs staffed by dedicated personnel that reinforce a culture of prevention, response, and accountability for the safety, dignity, and well-being of Sailors and Marines. The Department of the Navy does not tolerate sexual assault.

"We hope we never have to use this type of training that we did today during this drill, if we do, we will be prepared to provide the necessary medical and emotional help to any victim. SAFE is important because we care for our own and will provide follow-up services and consults if needed," said Cmdr. Susan Toyama, NHB Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner Training

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Facilitator and Quality Management Department Head.

According to Toyama, NHB has two drills slated for this month to recognize Sexual Assault Prevention month. The drills are arranged using a team approach with the SAPR/VA and SAFE.

“The drills take the staff from when our mock patient enters the ER or clinical area through the reporting options with the VA to calling in the forensic examiner to providing the patient critical follow-up education and support. It is a learning experience for all staff involved. Our goal to increase knowledge and awareness to provide quality safe care to our patients,” explained Toyama.

There is a designated Isolation Room in the Emergency Department to conduct SAFE. Although the ER is slated to transition to an Urgent Care Unit by Sept., 2014, the Isolation Room will still be in place, with a backup space also available.

“The Isolation Room in our Emergency Medicine Department area that can be immediately used is ideally suited for the need should it arise,” Toyama said, noting that NHB will provide compassionate, competent medical care that is victim-centered, gender-sensitive and takes into account the reporting preferences of the individual. “I think the drill went well. Everyone was helpful and took care of our ‘patient’ without any long delays in care. They knew what they needed to do, and notified all the appropriate ancillary services correctly. I’m pretty proud of our ED, they did a great job,” stated Gee.



Honing her vital skill as a command victim advocate, Hospitalman Britany Gil arrives on scene and immediately strives to establish a relationship with Candice during a Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations (SAFE) drill. Candice had been admitted to Naval Hospital Bremerton's Emergency Department after she explained to the front desk clerk she had been sexually assaulted. Gil's role as a victim advocate is to completely help any victim by listening, guiding and consoling them through the entire uncomfortable process. The drill was in held in conjunction with recognizing April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month
(Photo by Douglas H Stutz, NHB Public Affairs).

The Navy’s Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) directed military treatment facility like NHB last year to establish a multidisciplinary team to be able to handle any type of sexual assault case with a staff trained and ready to provide timely and appropriate medical care as soon as possible.

Staff members – 14 SAFE trained examiners and nine SAFE trained assistants – have learned correct procedures in evaluating a victim of sexual assault and how to properly go through the extensive course of action with the individual. Such training is required on an annual basis. There are also 15 victim advocates on the staff.

“We now have an elite selected staff fully qualified and certified to conduct a wide-ranging sexual assault forensic exam if needed. The operational staff is in place for the needs of the victims who need our assistance in their evaluation,” said Toyama.

According to Lt. Ken Padgett, NHB Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Program coordinator, the drill is a vital part of NHB’s on-going support of Sexual Assault Awareness Month to ensure Victim Care Protocols are handled in a standard, coordinated response whenever needed to meet the healthcare needs of sexual assault victims.

“Being able to conduct SAFE exams is a vital service to provide here at NHB. In case of a sexual assault at another command, victims can come here to receive medical care and receive an exam if they wish. Holding such a drill helps better prepare our departments in the hospital in case they encounter a Sexual Assault while here at work,” said Padgett, adding that in addition to spreading awareness, SAAM provides an opportunity for the command victim advocates to reach silent victims and to tell them that they don’t have to go through this alone and there is help out there.


Padgett, whose job as SAPR Program coordinator is to educate the staff on the current policy, and ensure training and current policy compliance, attests that SAAM is a way to highlight the growing problem of sexual assault. Sailors benefit from SAAM due to overlapping events that inform and educate.

“It’s our job to utilize SAAM as an opportunity to tell every Sailor that sexual assault ends with you. Be a bystander, help others, listen, and spread the word about sexual assault and let the world know how it affects every single one of us. So many victims are out there, and they’re silent. We need to end the silence. SAAM is just one time of year that we can really focus on sexual assault, but it should be highlighted everyday of our lives. We are all warriors in the battle against preventing sexual assault,” Padgett stated.

NHB is utilizing every Tuesday of this month to pass out awareness (teal) ribbons to wear on the staff ID’s allowing staff to show their support in preventing sexual assault. In addition to the ribbons, people are filling out a small questionnaire which can help get the Sailors engaged in thinking about how they actually play a part in preventing sexual assault. There is also a run with ‘Question and Answer’ stops that combines exercise with education, and a follow-up 5K and One Mile Run to also help show support.

On a regular basis, NHB ensures that sexual assault education is provided to every Sailor. There is a informational photo board on the first floor displaying the command’s victim advocates, so staff as well as beneficiaries are aware of who they can turn to in case they have questions or need help. Additionally throughout the entire hospital, DoD Safe Helpline posters are affixed so everyone knows where to turn for increased professional help if needed.

NHB’s SAPR program and SAFE capability provide a balance of focused education, comprehensive response, compassionate advocacy, and just adjudication in order to promote professionalism, respect, and trust, while preserving Navy mission readiness.



About vjohnson

